

## “Sin: The Most Dangerous Thing in the World”

Genesis 4:6-10

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Epiphany Season

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As we move through our sermon series on Genesis 4-12, our two fundamental assumptions about the early chapters of Genesis is first that these chapters are giving us the true history of humanity and the world, and second that everything here in these chapters is particularly significant because all the rest of what the Scriptures will teach are revealed here, in these first chapters of the Bible in seed form.

With that in mind, we’ve considered already over the past three Sundays what Genesis 4 has to teach us about sexuality and childbirth, about our work in this world, and what it means to bring the fruit of our labors to God.

We’ve considered also fundamental importance of right worship, and how God taught Adam and Eve and their children to offer a sacrificial substitute for themselves as a way to prepare for the salvation he would one day bring through his Son.

If we’re going to be wise, we need to understand these things that Genesis is teaching us.

We need to consider these stories carefully, and though we are “modern” people, we need to measure our own lives against what is revealed here, in the first pages of the Scriptures.

And now, today, we’re going to focus in on another significant theme of Genesis 4, which is the danger and power of sin.

Our sermon text today is Genesis 4:6-10. Listen now once more to God's holy and inerrant word.

*6 The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it." 8 Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. 9 Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" 10 And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground."*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you. Prayer...

If we're going to be wise, Biblically speaking, we're going to need to believe that the world really is the way that God says it is.

And one of the things that God says is true is that the most dangerous thing in the world is sin.

We worry about a lot of things in the world, don't we? We see a lot of potential dangers, a lot of things that might hurt us, a lot of things that might go wrong.

But what the Scriptures teach is the most dangerous thing in the world is sin.

Sin is more dangerous than any virus. It's more threatening to our health than a cancer diagnosis.

Sin is far more menacing to our comfort and security than unemployment or an IRS audit or losing all our retirement savings in a stock market crash.

Sin is more catastrophic than a hurricane or a drought or a flood, or all the pipes in our house freezing and bursting.

Sin is a bigger problem than trade deficits or climate change or even nuclear war.

This is what the Bible teaches.

And moreover, the Bible consistently teaches that the sin that is most dangerous to us isn't the sins that other people commit, it's not the sin out there in the world somewhere, it's not the sin that might be committed against us by the wicked and the powerful — no, the sin that is most dangerous to us is the sin that *we* commit, the sin that resides in *our* hearts, the sin that we might be tempted to fall into if we don't walk in repentance and holiness in the way of Jesus.

Indeed, I would argue that when you're younger in your faith and still early on the path to maturity, it's fairly easy to see the sin in the people around you, to focus on the iniquity in the world out there. That's not hard.

But what's much harder is to rightly discern what is taking place in the chambers of your own heart and to rightly understand the danger of your own particular aptitude for sin.

Indeed, to grow in wisdom and maturity means to become more, not less, aware of your own capacity for destruction and rebellion, to see more clearly your own sin and guilt before God — to learn to say wholeheartedly, with one of the oldest prayers written in the English language: *"I have left undone those things which I ought to have done, and I have done those things which I ought not to have done; and apart from thy grace, there is no health in me. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon me, a miserable offender."*

This is why Paul, in 1 Timothy, writes to his younger pastoral protege: *“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”*

Think of the effect of those words on Timothy as a younger man, still growing in the faith. Here is Paul, undoubtedly his pastoral role model, the one who he seeks to imitate describing himself as *“the foremost of sinners.”*

Paul speaks this way because he has become wise, and he knows, intimately, his own capacity for self-destruction and sin.

This is why Solomon, in his wisdom, begins the book of proverbs (as we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning) with an extended warning against the power and temptation of sin, and tells his young son that those who engage in open sin think they are in control, in reality they *“lie in wait for their own blood; they set an ambush for their own lives.”*

Interestingly, before Solomon’s son could even begin to comprehend biblical wisdom, he first had to reckon with the profound danger of sin.

This is why our Lord Jesus taught his disciples to grow in wisdom not primarily by identifying the sin in the world around them, but by first seeing clearly the sin in their own hearts, instructing with these words: *“3 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”*

All of these principles of biblical wisdom regarding the danger of sin, and the importance of first identifying our own sin are found in our sermon text this morning in Genesis 4.

After the Lord rejects Cain's sacrifice he comes to this man and confronts him in his anger with words of kindness.

As Genesis 4 reads: *The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?"*

The first thing to notice here is that the Lord clearly lays out for Cain the way of repentance.

Repentance for Cain is not complicated. If he does well, his face will be lifted up to God, and he will be accepted.

In this particular situation, repentance for Cain means to simply humble himself, accept that he lives under God's just sentence of death, and ask Abel for a lamb which he can slay as substitute for himself — freeing him to give to God an offering of his labors from the fruit of the ground.

Repentance for Cain is not hard. It is not complicated. It is as easy as humbling himself and doing what is right.

And indeed, repentance for any of us is never complicated.

And the straight-forward nature of repentance is a fundamental part of God's kindness to us in the gospel.

Satan *wants* us to believe that repentance is some gargantuan task, that it's some complicated calculus of spiritual works and making ourselves acceptable to God through our efforts.

But that's simply false. It's a lie from hell itself that seeks to convince us that remaining in sin is simpler than turning toward righteousness.

A complicated path of repentance is not the gospel, and woe to those who put up false and unnecessary obstacles to the repentance of others (this, in fact, was one of the primary complaints of the Protestant reformation, which sought, among other things, to reform Rome's false doctrine of penance).

Beloved, repentance is simply turning away from our error, acknowledging our need of God's forgiveness, and embracing righteousness. And God offers that simple path to Cain.

But along with offering a simple path to repentance, God also warns Cain against the danger of the sin which resides in his heart.

The Lord goes on to say to Cain: *"And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it."*

The image the Lord gives Cain is a vivid one.

To refuse to repent is to make himself vulnerable to the domination of sin.

And in the image the Lord paints, Sin is like a beast that crouches at the door, ready to consume Cain if he does not rule over it.

The parallels to Genesis 3 and the garden are obvious here.

Sin is now personified, it is like the serpent that waits in the garden.

Sin, like the serpent, doubts the veracity of God's word. Sin promises good things. But ultimately, Sin will destroy Cain if he does not put it to death.

And instead of the serpent crouching the garden, sin now crouches in Cain's own heart.

It's fascinating to me that the Lord does not emphasize to Cain the danger his potential sin poses to Abel — Abel, after all, is the one whose blood will be poured out if Cain gives himself over to sin's power.

Rather, the Lord points out to Cain the danger sin poses to his *own* self.

Somehow, Beloved, we have to come to realize the truth of what the Lord speaks to Cain here.

The most dangerous thing in the world to you is not the sin that's out there.

It's the sin that's inside you, the sin that seems so attractive, so justified, but is actually crouching at the doors of your heart in order to consume and destroy you.

And when your Heavenly Father warns you against the sin in your life, he is not doing it because he wants you to suffer by forcing you to give up the sinful attitude or sinful behavior that is bringing you so much pleasure.

Rather, wants you to see with the eyes of truth. He wants you to see your sin for what it is — the most dangerous force in your life, an ugly beast that wants to consume and destroy you.

And indeed, this is just what Cain's sin does to him. He refuses to repent, he refuses to humble himself and listen wisely to the Lord's counsel, and his leaps to destroy him.

As Genesis 4 goes on to describe in verses 8-10:

*8 Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. 9 Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" 10 And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground."*

The tragedy in this scene is palatable.

This is the first death recorded in the Scriptures, and it is a death that occurs not because of a virus or a famine, not because of old age, but because of the direct effects of human sin as Cain turns on his brother and kills him.

Five times in these three verses, the word “brother” is repeated, underscoring the horror of what Cain has done.

As the older brother, Cain should have watched over Abel, should have protected him and kept him safe — instead, consumed by the sin crouching at his door, Cain entices Abel into the field with false words and puts him to death.

Later in Genesis 4, Cain’s descendants will invent wonderful things: musical instruments like the lyre and the pipe, physical advances like the forging of bronze and iron.

But here, all of those developments and inventions are tainted by this — Cain’s invention of violence and murder.

And, arguably, the most chilling thing about this story is not even the cold blooded murder of Abel.

It’s the total lack of contrition or regret on Cain’s part afterwards.

The Lord asks Cain, *“Where is Abel your brother?”*

And Cain does not even flinch. He says, *“I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?”* — managing both to lie as well as scorn the idea that Abel’s welfare is his responsibility at all.

The progression of Cain's descent into sin here is important.

It begins with his pride - his rejection of living under God's just sentence of death; his refusal to offer a lamb as a substitute to God in his own place.

And that sin of pride leads to his rejection of God's warning; and that in turn leads directly to murder, and finally to hardheartedness — lying to God and scorning his authority completely.

Beloved, Cain's story is recorded for us here as a warning.

Because your sin and my sin is no less dangerous than Cain's.

Remember the words of the Apostle James, who writes, surely reflecting on this story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4: *"But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."*

Implicit in the words of James and in this narrative recorded for us in Genesis 4 is this fundamental assumption.

All of us are in danger of taking our sin far less seriously than we should.

All of us are in danger of underestimating sin's destructive power.

Which is why our Lord chose his awful words with precision and care when he said, as we heard in our Gospel reading this morning:

*If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.*

Beloved, as we close this morning, I want us to just sit with these things for a moment.

I want us to feel the tension this story — along with the words of James and the teaching of Jesus — should create in our hearts.

Where are you potentially underestimating the danger of the sin in your own heart?

What is the sin you have made a false peace with?

What is the sin you have convinced yourself is not that big of a deal, the sin you have come to believe will not really destroy you from the inside out?

Because what the Word of God is saying to you today is that the sin in your heart is not inconsequential. It is not a neutral habit.

It is a beast that crouches at your door and wants to put you to death.

But the good news of the gospel is quite simple.

The grace of repentance is available to you, even today.

Remember the words of our Lord Jesus, who came proclaiming the gospel of God with these words:

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.*

As the Lord says to Cain, and says to us today as well:

If you do well — that is, if you turn from your sin, if embrace the path of repentance — will you not be accepted?

Indeed, beloved, you will. Your face will be lifted up.

For the power of your sin, however terrible, is nothing compared to the power of the grace and mercy of God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.